



Conflict and Forgiveness  
Sermon by Pastor Jean Duran  
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In my first congregation that I served in, I worked with an older pastor who had been in ministry for many years. His ministry experience had shaped him into a cynic and one thing that I always remember him saying is, “when you get people together you’re guaranteed two things, trash and arguments!”

The older I get the more I see this as a pretty true reality. Conflict seems to erupt at just about every juncture, whether you are like my two 18 month grandkids fighting over a toy, or you are a country at odds over the freedom to wear, or not wear, a mask!

Now, you would think that the one place where there might not be conflict is in Christ’s church, but, unfortunately, the church community is not exempt from conflict. Historically we’ve seen conflict played out in ways that have often turned violent and condemning and many innocents have been abused at the Church’s hand.

As a pastor, throughout the years I’ve seen church people become angry over so many different things. About decisions that have been made. About something that was said. About the color of the carpets in the sanctuary. What makes me so sad is that instead of trying to reconcile, or

simply “agree to disagree” I’ve seen people just up and abandon their church family.

Unfortunately, conflict is here to stay because any time you have more than one person in a room, there are going to be different opinions about how to do something! Conflict isn’t a bad thing. Conflict or differing opinions can help us fine tune a situation by looking at it with different points of view. The thing that brings brokenness into the community is when stubborn pride digs in. Proverbs 16:18 says “pride comes before destruction” and that says its all doesn’t it?! When pride roots itself deeply into someone’s heart that’s usually the end of the discussion.

If you and I are going to follow Jesus then we need to learn how to deal with conflict in a healthy way. Scripture has a lot to teach us about this part of our lives and about how to live in Christian community. For example, Eph. 4:26-27 says “be angry but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”

This is such wise advise! Right or wrong, there are things that are going to make us angry. We must remember that being angry isn’t a sin, it’s what we do with that anger that gets us into trouble!

Our gospel text for today gives us clear guidelines on how to deal with conflict within the Christian community. Matthew’s gospel was written some 30-60 years after Jesus had ascended into heaven. Matthew’s

audience was the newly formed church that was made up primarily of Jews who had decided to follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior, as their Messiah. Conflict ran rampant as this early church family tested the waters on just about everything: what ethnic groups could be in the church, who could be in leadership, economic divisions, the formation of worship styles, articulation of creeds and arguments about whether Gentiles had adhere to Jewish traditions like circumcision.

Matthew remembered his days with Jesus and how Jesus had taught his own disciples about conflict resolution. Matthew is the only gospel writer to add this story into his gospel. It makes you wonder how unstable the early Christian community was for Matthew to add this story to his gospel!

So, how did Jesus outline conflict resolution among his disciples?

The first step in conflict resolution is to address the issue one on one, between the two people who are involved. Jesus tells his disciples to try and work it out in a loving way with the willingness to forgive. Jesus' disciples are asked to pray about it and to seek God's direction for a peaceful resolution.

If this first step doesn't resolve the issue, then the second step is to seek assisted mediation. Someone is asked to sit with the two people in conflict, to hear both sides, and to provide insight into the situation. Together they ask God to direct them and help them find a peaceful resolution.

If reconciliation is still not to be found, the third step is to present the case before the entire congregation. In the early church, if a brother or sister was outwardly sinning, then it was the responsibility of the church to reconcile them back to God and back into the church community. If the offender would not “stop sinning” then they were to be treated as a “tax collector or a Gentile” ...in other words, they were to be excommunicated.

Back in Matthew’s day, “excommunication” didn’t mean that a person was kicked out and left alone in their sin. The community of faith would give this person a period of renewed instruction in the Christian faith and they would be given the opportunity to renew their relationship with God and the church.

Forgiveness was readily given if one truly repented, and they were then welcomed back into the church community. The end goal was **always** to bring that person back into faith and back into the fellowship of the church.

I think that if we are to fully understand this teaching on dealing with conflict in Matthew 18, then we must read it in the context of the 2 parables that surround it. Right *before* verses 15-20 we read the parable of the Lost Sheep. Do you remember that story? The shepherd leaves the flock to search and find the one lost sheep.

Right *after* verses 15-20 is the parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Do you remember that story? A servant receives punishment because he did not forgive as he had been forgiven. Jesus' conclusion to this story was that Christians will be punished if they do not have forgiving hearts.

These two parables teach us that God's heart is filled with abounding grace and forgiveness and the conclusion is that the Christian community is to strive to have this same heart when we deal with one another. In the midst of this teaching time Peter turns to Jesus and asks him, "how many times should I forgive someone when they sin against me? Seven times?" He probably thought he was being generous but Jesus replies, "no Peter, that is too little. You must forgive seventy times seven times." In other words, in the Christian community, forgiveness is always the end goal!"

I believe this was good news for the early church and I believe it continues to be inspirational good news for God's Church today! If only we would have ears to hear!

Many years ago, at my second church, there was a family that had a little boy and every Sunday he would run up to me and give me a big hug. I watched him grow up until he was about 7. He was a great kid, but he didn't listen very well and his SS teachers and his VBS leaders always had a hard time with him because he disrupted the class and, if he didn't get his way, he'd run out of the room and hide in the church somewhere.

Several teachers tried to talk to his mom about his behavior, but the mom didn't want to hear it.

One day one of the teachers approached me and filled me in on the rising conflict between this mom and one of the teachers who had tried to talk to her one on one about her son's behavior. I guess the conversation got pretty heated and several people had witnessed it. They asked me if I would arrange a sit down between these two women to try and resolve this situation.

The teacher was in agreement to meet. But, when I asked the mom to sit down and try to reconcile, she became so angry that she turned from me to walk away. I said "please wait." She stopped and turned back to face me. I told her, "if there is any place in this world where there is the hope of working things out, any place where we can ask God to help us forgive and move on together, its in the church. Please, I think Jesus wants us to try and work it out!" She looked at me with so much anger and she told me, "I won't talk to that woman and I'm never coming back to this church again!"

A few weeks went by and this family didn't show up. I tried calling and I left many messages. I finally got hold of the husband, who by the way was serving on council, and he sadly told me that as much as he regretted it, his wife wasn't going to budge. She just wouldn't forgive or try to reconcile and he said they would be looking for a new church.

I'm sure you can imagine how deeply this affected me. But, there's more to this story. About 10 years later, I was guest preaching at a church and as I looked out into the congregation, I saw this same family. During the service that day, the seniors graduating from high school were prayed for, and this young man, that I knew as a little boy, was there, being blessed to go to college.

Throughout the service I noticed that the mom did not look up at me, even though I tried to catch her eye. At the end of the service, I stood at the door greeting people as they left and I noticed that this family did not pass by. Then I noticed that they were standing up by the front talking to another couple, so, I took a deep breath, and asked God for grace, and I approached them. The dad welcomed me, along with the other couple, but the mom kept her head turned away.

I turned to the boy and I said, "you probably don't remember me, but when you were a little boy you always ran up and hugged me after the services. I just want to wish you many blessings as you go off to college."

During this brief greeting the woman's face was so hostile that her husband looked embarrassed and the other couple kept looking from her to me, confused at her behavior. And, before I even finished, she just abruptly turned and walked away. It was very awkward. I just said my goodbye and went out to my car. For me this was heart-breaking that a sister in the faith, even after so many years, had not forgiven and moved on. I prayed for her, and I still do, because her unwillingness to forgive and reconcile has

become a huge burden on her and she is the one who suffers under its bondage.

Stories like this rise up all the time from God's church and I think it must truly grieve God's heart! My dear friends in Christ, I know we can do better than this!.

There is enough conflict and arguments and tension and pain raging all around us in our world. Sinful pride is what rules. All people care about is what they want, with no consideration for anyone else. We don't need this same conflict in the church. Jesus models for us a different way of doing things. He teaches us to humble ourselves and to forgive one another, just as we have been forgiven. He teaches us not only a methodology to deal with conflict, but He also gives us the power and strength to do it, even when we think we can't. He teaches us that life isn't just about us, life is a gift that is to be shared and we must think of "the other" because our actions always have consequences.

We can't control the storm that rages around us, but we can control how we treat one another in our faith family. I want you to remember this the next time you post something on your face book page or you send an email or you make a phone call or you decide to talk about someone. We are "kingdom people" and we are called to act like "kingdom people."

We pray for God's kingdom to be "established on earth as it is in heaven."  
These cannot simply be words. We must make it happen as we choose to treat one another with love and respect. As we listen and try to understand the other side of an opposing opinion. As we forgive because Jesus has forgiven us.

I think that we know these kingdom principles in our head, but today, let's choose to let these kingdom principles shape our hearts and influence the way we live. Basically, let us practice what we preach. Let us bind our world in forgiveness and reconciliation and let us loose love into the world just like Jesus does!

Let God's people say, Amen.